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ABSTRACT

This paper, which searched studies of the teaching behavior of elementary school writing teachers, found few studies with documented evidence of actual teaching behaviors. Most studies were concerned more with examining teaching approaches than with examining actual teaching behavior involved in the approaches. The writer argues that the "approach" studies are relatively easier to conduct than studies assessing teaching behavior. There is a need for criteria for analyzing what the teacher does when he teaches writing. Better measuring instruments are also needed so that researchers will know when a specific teaching behavior has been successful. The writer also argues that research in teaching behavior of composition teachers ought to be better coordinated so that this research will have wider scope and broader implications for the elementary school program. (DI)

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Implications of Research Studies in the Teaching of Writing (1966-1971)

Eileen Tway

A survey of the recent research in the teaching of writing shows that most studies have been concerned with investigating methods or approaches. The researchers have compared and contrasted approaches to see which one would lead to better writing results. Often the results were inconclusive, but these studies have paved the way for further research to examine what the teacher does in connection with the various approaches. The question becomes, "Which approach combined with what teaching strategies or behaviors brings the greatest improvement in writing?"

The abundance of "approach" studies with only general descriptions given for the teaching behavior involved no doubt reflects the ease with which this kind of study can be done as contrasted to the difficulty of determining specific teacher behaviors in using a given approach. There is an obvious need for criteria or specific guidelines for analyzing teacher behavior.

A few of the studies revealed promising leads for the setting up of further research in this area. Biberstine (1967) found that the better writing students in fourth grade tended to see their teachers as being easy-going, pleasant, kind, clear, friendly, and soft. Although he reports positive correlations between certain personal characteristics of teachers and students' achievement in composition, Biberstine makes no claim that there is a causal relationship. Still, his study of teacher characteristics gives clues as to the kind of behavior that may affect writing results positively. It should be noted, too, that Biberstine used a modification of the Osgood Semantic Differential to obtain pupils' perceptions of their teachers' characteristics. His modification and use of the instrument as described opens an important avenue for the assessment of teacher behavior, that of using pupil ratings. Biberstine's study merits close further consideration.

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A small study by Ujlaki (1968) was concerned with the use of children's writings as a basis for individualized instruction. The sample and study were so limited that the results can not be generalized, but a major part of the instruction was conducted through individual conferences about personal writing. This seems to have important implications for the teaching of writing. The conference is a big part of the individualized reading program; it stands to reason that the individual conference would also be important in a writing program. Ujlaki's use of the conference should be considered as an example of specific teacher behavior to be further examined.

Huntington (1969) investigated the effects of instructional variables on syntactic complexity and clarity in children's written composition, and found that what the teacher does in the post-stimulus period of prewriting seems to have no effect on the actual writing. Huntington concluded that another important set of variables, that of oral discussion of content and oral planning for writing on the part of the children, should be studied. He suggested that it was possible that oral imitation and practice of his own, other students', and the teacher's responses to a particular stimulus for writing might carry over into the child's written composition.

A study by Beeker (1970) did subsequently investigate the effects of oral planning on composition. Beeker's findings showed that class discussions did not seem to result in improved writing. However, Beeker concluded that more paired-student activity should be introduced into the language program, for she found that verbalization of one's own ideas (on the part of the child) is more conducive to mature writing than is listening to others' ideas -- and that paired communication would give the individual child more talking time than would total class discussion. In a paired-student situation, the role of the teacher would change from that of discussion leader to that of facilitator of learning. Sometimes what the teacher does <u>not</u> do is as important as what the teacher does.

After the researcher has analyzed what the teacher does or does not do, there needs to be some valid way of measuring results in terms of writing produced. Better measuring techniques and instruments are needed so that researchers will know how much "success" has occurred as a result of specific teaching strategies. Often in the past researchers have not really been measuring what they purported to be measuring, or they were using inadequate instruments. The quality of instruments used has varied greatly. Many, if not most, instruments are limited to measuring quantitative rather than qualitative aspects of writing.

Wiggins (1969), for example, used as his measure the number of simple sentences contained in the total number of sentences written on the assumption that the fewer simple sentences used, the more mature the writing would be. Wiggins' results were the opposite of what he expected, and he concluded, "Unfortunately at this time, there are no definitive answers or a consensus of what constitutes good writing." (p. 56)

Investigators need to make the effort to establish criteria for good writing and thus understand more about what they are trying to measure.

Hunt (1965) has provided a good foundation for other researchers by determining the T-unit to be a valid indicator of maturity in syntactic control. Hunt refers to the shortest grammatically allowable sentences into which a composition can be segmented as T-units. This allows for complex and simple sentences, but eliminates compound sentences. Subsequent researchers have built on his work and supported and extended the findings. Data now exists as to what to expect on the different grade levels. This index could be one important criterion reference for persons attempting to measure writing.

The art of writing involves much more than syntactic control, however. A few studies show promising instruments that can be used for more qualitative assessment. Duffy (1967) developed an instrument to to measure creative poetry writing performance. It is an analytical scale describing seven elements of poetry. The elements investigated were theme, organization, solving the problem, stimulus perception, emotional depth, unusual relationships, and language. This kind of

investigation goes far beyond mere word counts or structural analysis. Duffy's instrument was found valid for measuring semantic novelty and should be considered by those studying the writing of poetry. Another study by Tway (1971) was concerned with the qualitative assessment of children's fiction writing. A Literary Rating Scale was devised and found valid for measuring maturity of fiction writing.

Biesbrock (1969) developed an instrument for measuring composition ability in young children (grades two and three). Since the writings of young children are usually short, there are few elements to measure, making it all the more difficult, and Biesbrock's work should provide clues in this area.

With careful measurement techniques, researchers will be able to properly assess amounts of improvement in writing as a result of various teaching strategies.

It will remain, then, to coordinate research efforts so that the findings will have wider scope and broader implications for the elementary school program.

Some studies seem to suggest theoretical models. One promising source is a study done by Emerson (1969). The purposes of Emerson's study were to construct a theory of language that would develop from the works of Suzanne Langer and Marshall McLuhan and to develop criteria that could act as a guide in the selection of activities for the teaching of language arts.

The studies presented here are by no means inclusive, but are reported because they indicate possible springboards to future study of teacher behavior and written composition. I feel convinced that if the leads discussed here were to be followed, improved research would also follow.

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